DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 607 RC 019 577

AUTHOR Bornfield, Gail
TITLE Grade Retention and Parental Aspirations for Students with Learning Disabilities.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 9p.; In: Montgomery, Diane, Ed. Rural Partnerships: Working Together. Proceedings of the Annual National Conference of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (14th, Austin, Texas, March 23-26, 1994); see RC 019 557.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; *Grade Repetition; *Learning Disabilities; *Parent Aspiration; *Parent Attitudes; Postsecondary Education; Rural Education; *Special Education
IDENTIFIERS *North Dakota

ABSTRACT

A survey examined the grade retention of learning disabled students in North Dakota and parental aspirations for these students at the postsecondary level. Questionnaires were completed by 251 parents of learning disabled students in grades K-12 in 3 North Dakota regional consortia for special education services. About half reported that their child had experienced retention between kindergarten and eighth grade. Of those retained, 76 percent were retained prior to placement in special education. Parents of students who were retained were less likely to expect their child to attend a 4-year postsecondary institution than were parents of nonretained students with learning disabilities. Of parents aspiring to a 4-year postsecondary institution, 60.8 percent were parents of nonretained learning disabled students. However, 57 percent of parents of retained learning disabled students expected their child to attend a vocational/technical program or junior college. Only 4 percent of parents expected their child to go straight from high school to a job. Results suggest the probability that retention is being used as a prereferral strategy for students prior to identification of learning disabilities.

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 369 607

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Diane Montgomery
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Gail Bornfield, Ph.D.
Minot State University
North Dakota

Grade Retention and Parental Aspirations for Students with Learning Disabilities

Grade retention is the practice of requiring a student to repeat a year of academic instruction in a particular grade (Jackson, 1975). The practice of retention is one of education's most common interventions for low achieving students. A recent report found that approximately 6% of all school-age children are retained each year (CPRE Policy Brief, 1990). Concurrently, a stratefied national sample included in the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1989) reported that 19.3% of public school students studied were retained at least once in kindergarten through eighth grade. Eight percent of these students experienced their retention in kindergarten or first grade.

Although retention has existed as an educational practice since school systems organized their students into grade levels in order to provide teachers with homogenous student groupings (Bucho, 1986), the debate over the effectiveness of retention continues. The attitudes on retention held by parents and educators are not supported by research on the effectiveness of the practice of nonpromotion. Public opinion supports retention unless the student can pass grade-and-curriculum-appropriate examinations (Elam, 1990; Frymier, 1989; Tomchin and Impara, 1992)). Parents of non-public and public school children supported retention of students unable to achieve at expected levels.

Tomchin and Impara (1992) examined teacher beliefs regarding the use of retention in grades kindergarten through seventh. Nearly 98% of teachers surveyed supported the practice of retention. Over 82% felt that retention could be a positive step as it prevents students from facing daily failure at the next higher grade. Over 69% of teachers indicated that

RC 019577

knowing retention is a possibility motivates students to work harder. The majority of teachers (64.7%) felt that retention was necessary to maintain grade level standards but also recognized (72.6%) that retention does not prevent classrooms from having a broad range of student achievement. Nearly 70% of teachers indicated that students with learning disabilities should not be exempt from retention practices.

Particular parent attitudes and behaviors have been associated with the practice of retention (Reynolds, 1992; Palladino and Shepardson, 1991.) The first is the parent's estimate of the child's ability (Cadigan, Entwistle, Alexander, & Pallas, 1988). Parents who feel their child is not capable of doing as well as his/her peers may convey this attitude to school officials resulting in retention being considered in the child's best interest. While parents who feel their child is relatively bright despite poor academic performance may be able to sway a decision for promotion. Students who are frequently tardy are more likely to be retained than students who are not. Lateness during the elementary years is considered a parent variable as the child has little control over it.

Reynolds (1992) reports, based on his research, that parent involvement and school mobility predicted the decision to retain low achieving students. Children whose parents were rated as more involved in school activities were 18% less likely to be retained. Children who changed schools once between kindergarten and second grade were 7% more likely to be retained than students with similar low achievement.

The central question in the retention debate is whether or not retention is an effective treatment for children who display delayed academic progress. The literature on the effects of retention shows either sizeable negative effects of grade retention in academic achievement, personal adjustment, attitude toward school, behavior, and attendance (Holme & Matthews, 1984; Reynold, 1992) or no effects (Jackson, 1975; Stover, 1990). A review of 63 studies of effects of retention (Holmes, 1989) suggests that children who are considered for retention but instead promoted gain more in terms of achievement on standardized tests comparable children who are retained.

In a study testing the effects of early grade retention on reading and math achievement in fourth grade for 1255 low-income mostly Black children, Reynolds (1992) found that retention had substantially negative effects on achievement in reading and mathematics. In this study, the matched-control-group analysis compared all retained students with 200 promoted students matched on reading and math achievement. Retainees performed 8 months lower in reading achievement than demographically similar and equally low-scoring promoted children after adjusting for effects of other variables in the model. In the area of math achievement, retainees performed 7 months lower than similarly matched promoted chiildren. The findings of this study did not support grade retention as an educational practice for children at risk.

A recent study examining high school students with a history of grade retention compared to a matched control group of non-retained students found retained students scored lower on a number of variables (Palladino & Shepardson, 1991). The students who were retained experienced lower scores in achievement and intelligence. Their grades were lower with higher absenteeism. They also scored lower than peers on three subscales of a self-esteem measure (The Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents). This is consistent with the findings of a comprehensive study on the effects of retention concluding that grade repetition is detrimental to social and personal development (Goodlad, 1954).

Palladino and Shepardson (1991) also examined the relationship between the grade retained and measured variables using the Peason Product-moment correlations. They found that retention in the upper elementary and middle school levels was associated with lower grades, less positive school attitudes, less time on homework, lower educational expectations, higher levels of reported discipline problems, lower self-control, and greater externalizing of responsibility.

Holmes and Matthews (1984) conducted a meta-analysis of 650 studies on grade retention and stated "those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes..."

(p. 232). There seem to be clear indications that the practice not only fails to remediate children's academic problems, but is also associated with poor self-esteem, negative attitudes towards school, and higher drop-out rates (Byrnes & LamAmoto, 1986; Grissom & Sheppard, 1989).

Researchers of drop out phenonenom have consistently found a significant relationship between grade retention and dropping out. Grisson and Shepard (1989) conducted three large-scale studies, involving 20,000 to 80,000 students each. They examined the relationship of retention to dropping out after controlling for achievement. They found that with equally poor achievement, students who repeated a year were 20 to 30 percent more likely to drop out of school. In a study conducted by the Association of California Urban School Districts (1985), drop outs were found to be five times more likely to have repeated a grade than high school graduates. Students who repeated two grades had a probability of dropping out of nearly 100 percent.

These results are particularly relevant for students with learning disabilities as the drop out rate for these students is extremely high. Zigmond and Thornton (1985) have found that 54% of students with learning disabilities who start ninth grade quit before graduation.

McLesky and Grizzle (1992) investigated grade retention of students with learning disabilities. Of 689 students with learning disabilities studied in Indiana, 58% had been retained prior to identification. For students without disabilities, the retention rate was approximately 25% of the general population in Indiana (Cummings, Hall, McCarthy, & Snyder-Gilbert, 1987). So the retention of students with learning disabilities was twice that of the non-disabled student population.

The present study was designed to address retention of students with learning disabilities and parental educational aspirations relative to retention. Specifically, this study looks at the rate at which students with learning disabilities in North Dakota are retained and parental aspiration for these students at the post-secondary level.

Method

The data for this investigation were collected in North Dakota during the spring semester of the 1992-1993 school year. Parents of students identified with a learning disability in three regional consortiums for special education services were sent questionaires. The questionaire requested information regarding retention and educational aspirations for their child. The sample included all parents of students with learning disabilties (K-12) in the selected regional consortiums. Questionaires were sent to 503 parents with 251 responding.

Parents were asked to indicate the age and grade of retention, if the child had been retained. They were also requested to give the age and grade of the child at initial placement into special education. Parents were then asked, if upon completion of high school, they expected their child to get a job, attend a vocational/technical school, attend a junior college (2-year), or attend a 4-year college or university.

Results

Of those parents responding, 49% reported that their child had experienced a grade retention between kindergarten and eighth grade. Of those retained, 76% were retained prior to placement in special education.

Examining the relationship of retention to parental aspirations, parents of students with learning disabilities who were retained were less likely to aspire to a 4-year educational institution than were parents of non-retained students with learning disabilities. Of the parents aspiring to a 4-year educational institution, 60.8% of them were parents of non-retained students with LD. While 57% of parents of retained students with LD expected their children to attend a vocational/technical program or junior college. Only 4% of the total parent population responding to the questionaire expected their child to go straight from high school to a job.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to elicit retention and post-secondary aspiration information from parents of students with learning disabilities. Parents reported that 49% of their children had been retained. This is more than twice the rate at which the general population is retained. Parents reported that of those retained 76% had been retained prior to placement into special education. These results support the findings of McLesky and Grizzle (1992) regarding retention prior to identification as a student with learning disabilities. The results of these studies indicate the probability that retention is being used as a pre-referral strategy. The efficacy of this practice is questionable based on research findings of negative effects of retention (Jackson, 1975; Cadigan, Entwistle, Alexander, & Pallas, 1988; Niklaston, 1987; Stover, 1990; Paladino & Shepardson, 1991; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; and Reynolds, 1992).

The results of this study also indicate that parents of students with learning disabilitties who have been retained have lower aspirations for them than parents of similar non-retained students. This may be a continuation of the parent variable of estimating the child's ability as low which plays into the initial retention of the child. This area needs further investigation before any inferences or conclusions can be drawn.

A limitation of this study is that only parents residing in North Dakota participated in the study. This reduces the generalization of results. The results of a similar study conducted in Indiana, cited earlier, forecast the results of this study in the area of retention relative to students with learning disabilities.

Based on the results of this study and the presented research literature, educators including special educators may want to explore alternatives to retention for children who are at risk for referral to special education.

References

Association of California Urban School Districts (ACUSD)(1985). Dropouts from California's Urban School Districts: Who Are They? How do We Count Them? How Can We Hold Them (or at Least Educate Them)? Los Angeles: ACUSD.

Bucko, R. L. (1986). Elementary grade retention: Making the decision. ERS Spectrum, 4, 9-13.

Byrnes, D. & Yamamoto, K. (1986). Views on a grade repetition. Journal of Research and Development in Education, 20, 14-20.

Cadigan, D., Entwisle, D., Alexander, K., & Pallas, A. (1988). First-grade retention among low achieving students: A search for significant predictors. Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 34, 71-88.

Cook, W. (194). Grouping and Promotion in the Elementary School. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

CPRE Policy Brief (1990, January). Repeating grades in school: Current practice and research evidence. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgus University, Center for Policy Research in Education.

Cummings, J.; Hall, G.; McCarthy, M.; & Synder-Gilbert, C. (1987). *An analysis of selected individual characteristics of third and sixth grade students based on level of performance on the Indiana Basic Competency Skills Test.* Indianapolis: Indiana Department of Education.

Edgar, E. (1987). Secondary programs in special education: Are many of them justifiable? Exceptional Children, 53, 555-561.

Elam, S. (1990). The 22nd Annual Gallop Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa.

Grisson, J. B. & Shepard, L. A. (1989). "Repeating and Dropping Out of School." In Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention, edited by L. A. Shepard and M. L. Smith. London: The Palmer Press.

Holmes, C. (1989). Grade level retention effects: A meta-analysis of research studies. In L.A. Shepard & M. L. Smith (Eds.), Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention (pp 16-33). Philadelphia: Palmer Press.

Holmes, T. C. & Matthews, K. (1984). The effects of nonpromotion in elementary and junior high school pupils: A meta-analysis. Review

of Educational Research, 54, 225- 236.

Jackson, G. (1975). The research evidence on the effects of grade retention. Review of Educational Research, 45, 613-635.

National Center for Educational Statistics (1989). National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Washington, DC: Author.

Palladino, P. & Shepardson, J. (1991). A follow-up study of high school students with a history of grade retention. Psychology in the Schools. 28, 310-316.

Reynolds, A. (1992). Grade retention and school adjustment: An explanatory analysis. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 14, 101-121.

Stover, L. (1990). The effects of early grade retention on the academic achievement of fourth-grade students. Psychology in the Schools, 27, 333-338.

Tomchin, E. & Impara, J. (1992). Unraveling teachers' beliefs about grade retention. American Educational Research Journal, 29, 199-223.

Zigmond, N. & Thornton, (1985). Follow-up of post-secondary aged LD graduates and dropouts. Learning Disabilities Research, 1, 50-55.